

ANALYSIS

The Rose Tattoo (1950)

Tennessee Williams

(1911-1983)

“*The Rose Tattoo* (1950) centers around the character of Serafina delle Rose, a Sicilian dressmaker who lives with her daughter in a small Gulf Coast village. Happily married to Rosario, a virile Italian truck-driver who has a rose (evidently a symbol of physical love throughout the play) tattooed on his chest, she is expecting another child as the play opens. When she is visited by Estelle Hohengarten, a harlot, she agrees to make a rose-colored shirt for Estelle’s sweetheart without realizing that Estelle is actually intimate with her Rosario. Then news comes that Rosario, smuggling narcotics in his truck under a load of bananas, has been killed in a fight with the police.

Serafina, morbidly brooding on her grief, locks herself in his house and for months refuses to dress or to attend to her business. Cherishing her dead husband’s ashes in an urn, she regresses constantly further into her melancholia. When Flora and Bessie, two priggish middle-class ladies, call for a blouse they have ordered, Serafina is rude to them, and for revenge Flora repeats to her the common gossip about the unfaithfulness of her husband; Serafina, stunned, becomes even more sullen and brooding. Her daughter Rosa, seventeen and just graduated from high school, picks this moment to introduce to her mother her boyfriend, a sailor named Jack Hunter. Serafina, skeptical over the faith of men, forces Jack to swear before an image of the Virgin that he will ‘respect the innocence of the daughter, Rosa, of Rosario delle Rose.’

In Act II a complication is introduced: by accident a young truck driver, Alvaro Mangiacavallo, calls at the house, and Serafina in spite of herself is struck with his resemblance to her dead husband. When Alvaro clumsily makes advances to her she rejects him, then gives him permission to return that night. Act III begins with a farcical courting scene in which Alvaro, hot-blooded but inept, is constantly repulsed by the inwardly confused Serafina. When Alvaro learns that her resistance is caused by loyalty to her dead husband, he proves through a telephone call that Rosario had actually been unfaithful to her; in a torment which fast becomes a passion, Serafina then gives her love to him.

The next morning Alvaro arises stupefied with a terrible hangover and confusedly makes advances to the sleeping Rosa, who has meanwhile returned from a date. A terrible three-cornered argument results; but in the end Serafina blesses Rosa’s marriage with Jack and forgives the clumsy Alvaro for his mistake. Life has triumphed over the cult of death in the Delle Rose household: Serafina’s long dead love has been reborn in the person of the handsome Alvaro. The success of *The Rose Tattoo* is the triumph of the characterization of its heroine. Alternating between an animal-like brooding and a fiery and hot-blooded passion, Serafina is simultaneously a vividly original human being and a symbol of healthy and unashamed womanhood, uninhibited by Anglo-Saxon puritanism and the middle-class bugbear of respectability.”

Donald Heiney

Recent American Literature 4

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“Set in a Sicilian community on the Gulf Coast, the play deals with a passionate and earthy dressmaker, Serafina Delle Rose, whose truckdriver husband, Rosario, has just been killed. Serafina abandons herself to grief, keeps Rosario’s ashes in a marble urn in the house, storms and rages and refuses to believe rumors that Rosario had been unfaithful, and finally, after three years of widowhood and frustration, meets a young truckdriver who, like the dead Rosario, wears a rose tattoo on his chest. Alternately superstitious and devoutly religious, Serafina is one of Williams’ most robust and healthy characters; unlike another of his primitive heroes, Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Serafina is basically warm-hearted and sympathetic to the needs of others. Her peasant simplicity makes her direct and violent, but not cruel. The Sicilian

neighborhood women and the earnest courtship of the not-too-bright truckdriver, Mangiacavallo, provide elements of clownish humor usually lacking in Williams' work"

Max J. Herzberg & staff
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Michael Hollister (2015)